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ABSTRACT

Philadelphia's voluntary school desegregation plan is designed to offer pupils the opportunity for educational experiences in multicultural, multiracial schools, and to prevent white flight from the public schools. Strategies for achieving desegregation include the creation of magnet schools, voluntary school pairing, the Alternative for Middle Years program, and "academics plus" schools. Magnet schools at the junior and senior high school levels have been successful in drawing students from all over the city and from private schools in order to study music and arts, engineering, science and mathematics. In order to avoid the danger that magnet schools might detract from the quality of instruction in other schools, the city has developed a plan to raise the academic achievement of all students through alternative schools and back-to-basics programs in which students, parents, and school personnel all participate in decision making. Finally, the pairing of predominantly white with predominantly black schools has resulted in successful mergers from the point of view of racial composition and academic goals. The Philadelphia experience demonstrates that it is possible to desegregate urban schools by offering freedom of choice. (Author/GC)

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"Desegregation of Urban Schools ... Is It Possible?"

The Philadelphia Story

by

Richard D. Hanusey

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In Philadelphia, the cradle of American liberty, it is appropriate that the School District of Philadelphia is implementing a Voluntary Desegregation Plan to desegregate its schools. The plan is based on freedom of choice and offers parents a variety of educational options for their children.

The School District adopted the slogan, "Voluntary Desegregation... Together We Can Make It Work!!" to emphasize that desegregating the schools is not the responsibility of the School District alone. It is the responsibility of every segment of the community - students, parents, administrators, teachers, School Board members, clergy, business and civic leaders, and City, State, and Federal agencies - all working together.

"Only the leadership of elected officials and administrators can generate a mutually supportive pattern of enforcement actions to create stable desegregation and to build genuine integration. Without this, no lasting solution seems imaginable," states Gary Orfield in Must We Bus?[1]

The commitment to the rights of minorities and to the concept of brotherhood is a viable part of the history and tradition of our City. In Philadelphia, school officials are certain that not only is desegregation of urban schools possible, but that it is imperative, if we are to prepare pupils to live in a multicultural, multiracial society.

Although the population of the City of Philadelphia is approximately sixty percent white and forty percent minority, the pupil population of the public schools is just the opposite. This is due to a large and well-supported

Catholic school system and a variety of other church-related and private schools.

With a pupil racial population which is sixty-eight percent minority (predominantly black, Hispanic, and Asian), the School District of Philadelphia has two tasks: (1) to offer pupils the opportunity for educational experiences in multicultural, multiracial school environments, and (2) to prevent white flight from the public schools because of desegregation. The Voluntary Desegregation Plan addresses itself to these two tasks.

The Voluntary Desegregation Plan has the approval of both the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission and the Commonwealth Court. Although the School District is only in its first full year of implementation, there have been outstanding successes. These include magnet schools, the Alternative for Middle Years (AMY) program, voluntary school pairing, and academic plus schools.

With a grant from the Federal Government, under the Emergency School Aid Act (ESAA), the School District opened its first magnet school, the High School for Creative and Performing Arts in February, 1976.[2] The school uses an interdisciplinary approach to the arts and offers pupils at the secondary level a unique, individualized educational experience not presently available in existing schools. Located in the heart of the cultural center of the City, the school is surrounded by art and music colleges, museums, the Academy of Music, theatres, and libraries, making possible independent study and advanced study in other institutions. The school easily met Federal guidelines relating to racial composition, and it now has a population of fifty-three percent white, forty-two percent black, and five percent Hispanic and other minorities. The

High School for Creative and Performing Arts has attracted students from all over the City and from non-public schools. The school is convenient to public transportation and is located in a safe area - two crucial considerations in selecting sites for a magnet school.

As a result of the success of the High School for Creative and Performing Arts, two additional magnet schools were opened in September, 1979 - The High School for Engineering and Science and the Middle Magnet School for Science and Math. These, too, are funded by a grant under ESAA.

The High School for Engineering and Science is located in a building on the campus of Temple University. The school offers advanced pupils the opportunity to complete high school requirements by the end of the 11th grade. During their final year, students have the option of taking courses for advanced credit at five cooperating universities, having an internship experience in a cooperating business or industrial firm, or other options. The High School for Engineering and Science has been able to attract white and minority pupils, and it is desegregated not only by race but also by sex. Of the pupils enrolled in the first year, thirty-eight percent are female. The school, which opened with 300 pupils in grade 9, will add a grade each year until it is a full four-year high school.

The Middle Magnet School for Science and Math has 250 pupils in grades 6 and 7. Next year, an 8th grade will be added, and advanced math students will have the option of taking 9th grade algebra in a high school located on the same site as the magnet school. It is planned so that pupils from the Middle Magnet School for Science and Math may apply to the High School for Engineering and Science, thereby providing pupils with an articulated program.

The School District is presently planning two additional magnet schools for the 1980-81 school year - a High School for Fashion Design and Merchandising and a High School for Finance.

Admittedly, magnet schools cannot desegregate an entire school district. However, magnet schools, in conjunction with other educational strategies, can and are able to contribute to the elimination of racial isolation for many pupils and to improve the quality of life in our cities and metropolitan areas, according to Levine and Havigurst.[3]

The authors are concerned, as are school and community leaders in Philadelphia, that magnet schools detract from the quality of instruction in inner-city schools by draining the best pupils and teachers, leaving those schools even more devoid of positive academic leadership than they were in the first place. Levine and Havigurst, in The Future of Big City Schools, stress the importance of bolstering the academic skills of inner-city pupils and the need for systematic efforts to deliver instructional services more effectively.

To this end, the School District of Philadelphia has developed "A Blueprint for Academic Achievement," a comprehensive plan to raise the academic achievement of all pupils. The blueprint is a long-range effort and includes the following elements: the community; leadership; curriculum; instruction; parent partnership; organization; and evaluation. The blueprint was presented recently to all the administrators in the School District of Philadelphia and to the Board of Education. The blueprint recommends specific objectives in each category and actions to meet those objectives.

In Philadelphia, it has become clear that a number of parents are seeking alternatives for their children in the middle years. Philadelphia is organizing a network of Alternative for Middle Years (AMY) schools. Each of these schools has a special emphasis: humanities; arts; science; communications; etc. However, AMY's also have the following common elements: small size; off-site location;

individualized approaches to learning; highly structured mini courses, with emphasis on basic skills and mastery of learning; parent and community involvement; and resources to meet the needs of pupils in the middle years. As with magnet schools, AMY's are open to pupils throughout the City, and they monitor their enrollments to maintain racial balance. Funded by the School District operating budget, these schools are contributing greatly not only to the desegregation effort, but to the level of satisfaction of parents toward the public schools. Many of these pupils were formerly non-public school pupils.

The third type of educational option being offered is the academics plus school, a type of back-to-basics school. Philadelphia's first academic plus school was opened in September, 1976, in a vacant school building in an integrated section of the City. Pupils and their parents must agree on certain policies regarding homework, attendance, behavior, dress, promotion, and parent involvement. Pupils in the Fitler Academics Plus School have consistently shown substantial gain in national test scores in reading and math.

The Fitler Academics Plus School proved so popular that today there are twenty-nine schools with a modified academics plus program. Until the implementation of the Voluntary Desegregation Plan, these schools, however, attracted few pupils from outside the neighborhood. This condition has changed dramatically this year, with over 4000 minority pupils transferring to predominantly white high schools in the northeast section of the City.

This September, the Dunbar School, a predominantly black school located in the heart of the inner city in North Philadelphia, was designated an academics plus school. Dunbar had a reputation for academic excellence, and when news of its new designation as an academics plus school, similar to the Fitler model,

spread to other communities, fifty white pupils transferred to Dunbar. This is in direct contradiction to the commonly accepted myth that white parents will not send their children to inner city schools. No longer a neighborhood school, Dunbar is confident of attracting white pupils in greater numbers next year.

The final, and most dramatic, educational strategy being used in Philadelphia to desegregate its schools is the pairing of schools. It all began in the most unlikely area of the City, South Philadelphia, an area closely identified with racial strife in the Whitman Housing Project. Two nearby schools, one predominantly white (Girard), and one predominantly black (Poe), planned to merge into one desegregated school, Girard/Poe, with pupils attending Girard for grades 1-4 and Poe for 5-8. The Girard Academic Music Program (GAMP), another highly successful desegregation program, was able to move from an off-site location in a South Philadelphia armory to the Poe School. GAMP, which also receives funds under the ESAA grant, offers pupils in grades 5-9 intensive vocal and musical instruction along with a strong emphasis on the development of basic skills.

The merger of Girard and Poe came about after months of meetings among parents, staffs, administrators, and community leaders of both schools. It resulted from the hard work and commitment of many, many people.

Taking a lesson from Girard and Poe, two other schools in another community, also viewed as unlikely to become part of the desegregation plan, planned to merge. The Willard and Powers Schools are in the Kensington section, a provincial blue-collar white neighborhood. Kensington, however, has an enclave of blacks which dates back to the turn of the century, when wealthy Philadelphia families spent summers in Kensington, taking their black servants with them.

The merger of these two pairs of schools is considered a coup for the School District of Philadelphia, which is now seeking other possible mergers. Both these mergers, in generally considered racially isolated communities, have shown the School District that mergers can be effected in any neighborhood as long as people are committed to making voluntary desegregation work.

The School District of Philadelphia is convinced that the educational options described in this article, and those options still being developed, can bring about a degree of desegregation in urban school districts. How much desegregation, of course, will depend on the racial composition of the schools.

In Must We Bus?, Orfield addresses the question of whether there is a feasible desegregation plan for the largest cities. He says the answer depends on how desegregation is defined. If it means having predominantly Anglo schools, then it is possible in no city. If, however, desegregation means racial balance, then it is possible, he feels, in all cities.[4]

Using a racial balance formula of no more than seventy-five percent and no less than twenty-five percent white as a desegregated school, the School District of Philadelphia has been able to desegregate, or very nearly desegregate, more than twenty additional schools in just one year. The School District acknowledges that not every school will be desegregated, but every school will be a part of the desegregation effort, and every school will be a part of "A Blueprint for Academic Achievement."

As to the charge that under the Voluntary Desegregation Plan, the School District of Philadelphia is encouraging a new elitism, the School District stands on the true meaning of "elitism" as "choice." In "Toward Elitist Schools," Jarrett urges that schools encourage "a new elitism," where every student will

have the satisfaction of belonging, of having persisted to mastery, and of having developed a sense of excellence in a particular skill or knowledge.[5]

For many parents, as shown by the responses to the Voluntary Desegregation Plan, the commitment is to quality education. If that includes integration, as it will in all of the schools involved in the Voluntary Desegregation Plan, then that is a plus - a plus that can make the difference in the future not only of the pupils, but of the City of Philadelphia.

The Philadelphia Story demonstrates clearly that it is possible to desegregate urban schools, and that offering freedom of choice is the best road to achieving desegregation.

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Footnotes

[1]Gary Orfield, Must We Bus?, The Brookings Institution: Washington, D.C., 1978.

[2]John R. Vannoni, "The Role of the Magnet School in Integration," in New Perspectives on School Integration, edited by Murray Friedman, Roger Meltzer, and Charles Miller, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979

[3]Daniel V. Levine and Robert J. Havigurst, eds., The Future of Big City Schools, University of Chicago, 1977

[4]Orfield, op. cit.

[5]James L. Jarrett, "Toward Elitist Schools," Phi Delta Kappan, May, 1979.